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### CHARCOAL

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CHARCOAL

By

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BA, Columbia University, New York, NY, 2000

Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in Creative Writing, Poetry

The University of Montana  
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May 2008

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## CHARCOAL

Chairperson: Greg Pape

Co-Chairperson: Karen Volkman

Co-Chairperson: David Moore

CHARCOAL is a book of poems.

For my parents

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**CHARCOAL**





## BALLAD PAST MERIDIAN

The waste we made of the museum  
that day in Owl Park, watching soldiers  
crest on the ridge. Your father's holding

company, his soldered wire, spooled  
thread—how articulate, how schooled  
his ashen industry as you inherited it.

You soured in the unlikely hawthorn,  
Owl Park a black snake against the barges:  
China Shipping, Nippon Yusen, they

ghosted into the Narrows. Gone to gravel,  
the bracket wall a blanket of swordgrass,  
bindweed and paint, stripped blank, then

excavated in the nocturne of the autoclave.  
We slow-danced in its resin. Once, entrain  
to Owl Park, we gazed upon the oily bilge-

water, upon the possibility of blaze and now,  
we blaze. We love ourselves best. Owl Park  
another world now, and you in your pallor

of placard lakes, your father's Michigan  
Railway, pill advertisements and candy  
wrappers like glowworms in rotten logs

along the pier, where old Greek men fork  
their catch of mercury and lead, warm their  
hands at the mouth of a stomach of sand

and plunge their cans into the tarmac.  
Winter engraves its borders in shellac.  
We own no virtue. Our barges adrift

in historical process, roads reduced  
to trucks tarrying, our childhood  
grown lax in the wisteria.

## GREENPOINT TERMINAL MARKET

Follow the yellow line to  
the yellow weeds in their  
yellow ditches: gasoline,  
one rosebud match to spark and  
burn like a television.

Paranormal glow of the  
Citicorp Center, aqua-  
marine of a caged parrot.

Ruin is a cultured pearl.

Rain comes as requirement.

Requires we submit to  
its loose, fluted memory  
fluttering like a receipt

in the incision, human-  
colored haze in the hollow  
sector. Iron sleeves of drain-  
age where pigeons in wire-  
less slate skies return to roost,

lucite-winged moths narrowing  
beneath sodium streetlamps

dim

as the maples in the park  
turn  
on—

Sleep without memory, our  
ruin.

Past deferred from becoming  
passed, from emerging legend  
in the foreground of trauma,

ruin itself is traumatic.

Its fingerbone begs us to  
unearth its contusions from

corridors of lightning-singed  
Christmas holly. Ruin is  
forensic, identity  
as many forms of erasure

as preservation: coin-toss  
distribution of spiders,

dandelions in bluegrass  
where bulbs of black brands curl from  
milkweed sown in sow-thistle:  
waxmyrtle coils, smokestacks

titanium light has cursed  
with specificity, each  
raw wire, each cinquefoil  
chrysanthemum equally  
alight in terse, unrehearsed  
testimony that marks their  
place as site.

—from the northern  
whirlpool of Spuyten Duyvil  
to the southern breach of time-  
lapsed barges' haul, the Narrows,  
the East River under gold-  
leaf, rippling, oil-steeped welt  
coal-thick with potential, its  
pillars of pyrite, jagged

skyline hazardous with zinc,  
cadmium, thallium, lead,  
benzene, silver, osmium,  
nickel, carbon monoxide,  
sulfuric acid, rubber,  
asbestos, arsenic and  
fiberglass—

—from the open field to the  
                    curtilage, to the tag-pocked  
hull, stripped with chemical wash,  
  
from desire to rumor  
  
                    from dynamite to fiber-  
                                    optics, from arson coeval  
  
                    to vagrant, to armed guard, to  
hex, to diode, to copper-  
                    barred bales of synthetic knits,  
                            polyester butterfly  
collars, silk crêpe ruching, shirred  
                    crates of marjoram rot  
  
burnt—

In the end, a fly dies as  
flies die.

Our rust, not our fear  
configures the elements.

Ruin is a misspelled word.

Our ruin comes second-hand,  
like clothes.

Radium buried  
in an ingrown nail.

Footprints  
like neologisms we  
cannot reverse.

Ruin is  
a cask of flies.

Neither dead  
nor alive, the mass.

In the  
end, a fly dies as flies die.



When a body moves within  
ruin,  
the body becomes  
the impasse within its core.

The ruin becomes a cask.

The body becomes a cask.

All that becomes,  
becomes a  
cask.

All that becomes,  
becomes  
a core.

Ruin is not meant  
to be amplified,  
though it  
is bought and sold as more,  
more.

When a body moves within  
ruin,  
the body becomes  
remains. Not meant to be named,  
a body is not a name  
for a body is not meant  
to be covered. Ruin is  
not memory, though it steeps  
its ward in memoriam  
more often than not. Ruin  
is naught and knot and ø,  
as  
ruin should and could and ought  
and when in the scabbard of  
kite and cot and caught,  
is wrought.

Dust filming the lung of a hepafilter. Clotting the blades of a white plastic desk fan. Red lettuce leaf, heirloom tomato. Cloud oil, cider vinegar. Satellite in a stone statuary. Drywall between iron pylons accreted along McCarren Park. Meridians of cathedrals cached under glass atria. Asterisks. Camels along the Dead Sea. Bauhaus. Dried mackerel strung from coarse hemp twine. Green vireo born with one bent wing. Cellular transport. Cubed styrofoam. Charcoal.

## NOISE

Our songbirds evolved to migrate  
nocturnally, when predators  
retire and winds die, but now,  
in the sky above the Tribute  
in Light, whorl in the white floodlit  
condensation. Smog, particle  
suspension, whatever the news  
calls the stale fractal void, birds flit  
between its bright spokes and the  
dark site, impossible to track  
any one bird for any length  
of time as they coil, blind and  
wailing in the bold false dawn that  
lured them inside the fingerprint.

THERE IS NO PART OF THE BODY  
THAT HASN'T BEEN PIERCED

Blessed are the ego mules, for they are shod with their own lead.

Blessed are the muckrakers, for they will fork the Milky Way from its gravel  
to delight in the gravel.

Blessed are the red beep of backing van, salty crinkle of amnesiac  
radio, crow squawk, clear whisper of HVAC, for they contain, at once,  
the variegated grasses of now.

And blessed their nonharmonic intoning, for blessed are the radical, the anarchist  
prostitute, insurgent  
motorcycle, unhinged trapdoor of a tarantula's oubliette, a fight  
not to forget one's silk net longings.

Blessed are the tattooed starlings and nautical insignia, for beneath them,  
only water.

Blessed are the executives, for they rise, cyclic, with the sun  
and will not know the surety of a wingbone  
pressed against an eggshell  
and will set.

Blessed are the politicians, for are they not unlike an eggshell.

Blessed are the bankers, for they are starving.

Blessed the egg of a heady swamp, umbilical gar, spun sugar  
cottonmouth maw, for they are not unlike  
the fog that cloaks them.

Indistinct  
seep of habitat with no beginning, no end.

Blessed are the firecrackers, cherry bombs, snapdragons, for they are  
the waterworks, sweaty palms, calendulas of sudden vision.

Blessed are the stars, for their asterisms  
give earth its philosophers.

Blessed is the sun, for it gives  
earth its feather headdress.

Blessed is the sun, for how is it not unlike a feather headdress  
on a mule, a Milky Way, a red beeping, a silk-bound door  
tattoo leading down into the firecracker wingbone.

Bless the manic sun, for how is it not a stoplight, an executive.

And the moon, for how is it not a purple thistle  
exploding in the rain, and how is it not the sun's  
campaign for better living through electricity.

The epidermis unhooks its canvas and tugs, for beneath  
the starlings and shooting stars, there is  
no blood, only grain.

The epidermis reveals its blank page  
like a prostitute, for tender needlework can whittle purple thistle  
whistling from a gravestone.

Ambulances are foaming, bless them.

Muskets of cattails with hunting caps, bless them.

The obese, the obtuse, the large and awkwardly-shaped,  
they wade in shallow water, bless them.  
And bless the tiny, the shrewd, the scrawny,  
anorexic and grim, for they have persisted in a wooded thicket.  
And bless the purveyors of TiVO and 5 AM long-distance,  
for they have taught us to moonlight as secretaries of shorthand endurance.  
And bless the clover-picking baby with the cleft-palate, may she emerge  
from the bassinet ambidextrous, with swans for hands.  
And bless the gossips, bless their colicky violins,  
wet and pink as roast beef in their vertigo of infancy.  
And bless the hail on the tin roof, screech of a March robin, dial tone,  
for is not the return of a familiar tone  
a memory of a tone  
in all of us

the farther we live on into ourselves,  
the farther we look back onto ourselves,  
the harder we have to listen, so bless

each peach, each nectarine, each apricot pit, each fifth metatarsal of each left hand, for the light  
of a star never stops but travels until it rings  
in its sweet dark center.

Place a penny beneath your tongue, taste the green almonds, bless them.

LISTENING FOR EARTHQUAKES  
IN A SHADOW ZONE

The moment the brass button  
vanishes, the lemniscus  
of lemon root turns leitmotif.  
A white towel dries on a hook.  
In cirrus, sycamores  
loaded with minutes. A blue orchard  
sinks its anchor and steepes.  
A name for a zipper is closed to the soul.  
Trapped in a room of red sand. A blue  
pill capsule lifted into a train  
window becomes a lemon  
the way wind in lemongrass harbors  
blue light. The way a rifle  
smells of pink snow and tobacco.  
The way howls affix ravens to  
glyphs. Given Lepidoptera, Lepidoptera  
dehisce. Given index, a desert  
aerially strafed. Given alphabet,  
a gray flag of rain, a tenement  
strewn through it. In a life,

one pours milk  
into a crystal vase, naked  
as a number. In a life, pines  
devour starlets. Sand  
whipped in a hurricane  
lamp. Given forgiveness, Lepidoptera.  
Given forgiveness, black mulberry  
lipstick scrawled  
the flight of cranes in a train window.  
A church organist pens the word *parasite*  
on her wrist. Maples blow  
into orange cysts. An autistic  
predicts the fall of a black trick.  
By the time words have been liberated,  
books will know the absence  
of books. Will know white  
annuals. Uranium tailings. Bullfrog eye  
clotted with maggots. In a life,  
a lime, a rivet. A camera  
tucked into a spine.





**BLACK WATER**



\*\*\*

a nightcrawler  
must sense a shadow

\*\*\*

jay flew the river until the river ran out  
could have flown further

never reached

the source

\*\*\*

once

a thunderstorm  
followed a stream  
to a point in the earth  
where water swelled

watch

factory  
paper factory  
paper clip  
airplane spoil  
industrial soap  
sanitizer  
factory spit  
toxins in

the aquifer      now

it storms every saturday

even milkweed  
are missiles

                  desire  
microphones

                  gowns

to sleepwalk  
barefoot

\*\*\*  
silt

black ants      casings  
of oak buds

dandelions larger than sacagewea dollars  
glinting      pin  
yellowjacket

broken window wings

stones green  
as grenades in  
aspen blades



\*\*\*

take spring an even year

bricks blue at dusk

turn the throat of the  
weeping cherry

\*\*\*

X  
RHODODENDRON, MARIGOLD

X  
BULLETS LACE METAL LIKE SALT THROUGH ICE

X  
AN ANOREXIC SUCKS A BLACK LOZENGE



X  
CONVULSE IN BLACK TULIPS

X  
PICNICS CARVED IN GREEN TABLES UNTIL CORRECTIONS

X  
BEACON BOUNDS ITS PRISM ACROSS THE WINTER SKY



X  
CHOCOLATE DOG TAG

X  
DELPHINIUM MOURNS TAIWAN

X  
MORMON TABERNACLE CHOIR: *BURNT LAND!*

X  
HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SACK OF SCREWS



X  
ORDNANCE IN A ZIPLOCK BAG

\*\*\*

\*\*\*





**GLASS**



1985 THE BOOK OF SAND

“The fear of infinity is a form of myopia that destroys the possibility of seeing the actual infinite, even though it in its highest form has created and sustains us, and in its secondary transfinite forms occurs all around us and even inhabits our minds.” –Georg Cantor

—Yes, Principal, I have ventured out of bounds.  
I twisted the swing until the steel chain broke  
and the globe has come unscrewed  
on account of my wandering hands.

I was only playing kickball when  
I found the patch of five-leaf clovers  
and traced their origin from center field  
to the drainage pipe at the edge of the cafeteria.

We are forever climbing, as Principal  
of Gainfield Elementary you should know  
the limits of the convoluted metal bars,  
the diminishing span of the blacktop:

First the hyacinths, the broken tulips,  
then the forsythia's yellow glow,  
the hole razored in the chain-link fence  
and the miles of ragweed to mow and mow—

## BAY OF TALLINN

One direction tapered into the paved and salted, where crooks of ebony trunks curved out of cracks in the asphalt, bare branches black and hooked as though the cracks themselves had sprouted and domed the deepening avenue, the avenue leading southward, into the city. Where the path wandered northward, dead pines brushed their fingers against the elms' gnarled fists as the oaks snagged their neighbors' darkening vertebrae. Above the rolling soot and snow, the natural world bristled in a skeletal glow. I turned my body from the winding and faced the wood, the stone wall, the copper gate gone blue where a hooded crow perched like a ball of ash, one garnet eye rolling back as the fledgling cocked its head.

It was here that the sidewalk diverted into a grove. Behind the copper gate, a man bundled in frayed tweeds bent like a stalk of wheat as he shuffled over a trail of ice-singed cobblestones. His ears were red coals, half-tucked into a fur hat, half-exposed to a wind that, beyond the wall, snapped the earth like a white blanket. The crow shot into a tree as the man approached. With one windburned hand, he unhinged the gate and hobbled through the opening, eyes fixed to the ground as though he hadn't seen the lever, as though the world itself were transparent.

His figure receded. The net of trees trembled. The sky hung low, matte as chalk.

I gripped the blue copper handle, depressed the lip with my thumb and felt the uneasy uncoupling of the lock. One metal joint whined as I swung the frame and slipped through, though the sound could have been my own exhale whistling through a nostril, or a sliver of a gale angling across a snowbank. Listening for the silver sound of metal or bone or ice, I heard only the rough, packing sound of snow beneath the rubber soles of my boots as I followed the man's footsteps in reverse. The shore lay somewhere in the distance, a green mineral scent sharpened by the late light. I stared up into the diffuse whiteness. The clouds had grown sullen, variegated in fluted shades like microcline feldspar where they jutted into the atmosphere, sunlight a lean trace of pyrite laced through the swollen opacity of the crystals—and at the base of the sky, the rusted tatting of a Ferris wheel.



The amusement park had long ago fallen into disrepair. Metal sidings of roller coaster cars were streaked with deep brown decay, cracks spreading from seams, pressing up from the peeling primary hues of paint. Capsules of a tilt-a-wheel lay scattered in the snow, scrub brush zagging through the white coat of ground and catching in the crevices of the mechanics. A few stray footprints led to a chain-link fence that sagged in its attempt to isolate the park from its surroundings. I paused at the cross-hatching of the wire, observing the frost where it forked like lichen across a cube of concrete. Melt leaked from the crusted veins of urine, amber in hue and suspended in yesterday's sleet, pure odor preserved. I stepped back onto the pressed ice of the path and followed the wind to the water.

Sweat dampened my woolens and the nylon lining of my down coat. If cold were a state of mind, my own mind had pitched a black tent where days were short and dim and nights, prolonged and jagged, temperature just below the level needed to secure circulation in the skin and vital organs. Beneath my boots and along the dirt-marred snowfall, pebbles pockmarked the slush where a sidewalk drunk with thaw had folded into slumber. The pewter hairs of the grove thinned. Branches of the oaks bowed, sagging under the weight of their icicles, their crows.

Eyes narrowing in the spitting wind, I toed forward until my fists stubbed against a limestone barrier that separated the soil of the lowland from the water, a wall that barred the walkway from a sharp drop onto a bank of frost-sheathed ice, a fractured onyx expanse. At the base of the wall, along the icy ridge, a pack of mute swans and varied seabirds dodged and dove for scraps of bread that tumbled from the hands of a woman balanced on the edge of the escarpment.

The woman wore her platinum curls pinned under a mauve wool hat. Her coat was trimmed with ermine, her hands wrinkled in the dishwater light. She flicked crusts from a plastic bag into the churning of feathers. Large as sows, two swans had necks thick as the width of a human leg. Caked on the obsidian knobs knotted above their orange bills, debris hardened the faces they whipped like weapons as they lunged for food, for each other's backs, hissing like the ice beneath them. Dusk rendered the woman dark as limestone. Her shadow bloomed along the wall, a wisp-shadow of her plastic bag ballooning along the ledge, blurring with my own on the birds' mucked down, on the veinless black marble bay.

## PORT OF MORROW

Gills of the fields devour black powders  
in bone hours, in the dim aquarium dawn  
as wicker slats of wind dimple the skin,  
a canvas shift beneath the deadlocked  
hemlock rattle. Black crabapple branch,  
glass slats of a brass-gridded greenhouse.  
Somnambulant silo sifting silver corn  
flour, dealated husk of a lichen-baked  
trail of 2-ton trailers stapled to the seams  
of a crust of grackles cracking from a drum,  
ale morning rippling deep on the tarpaulin:  
a bound volume, a rust sash, this grist-  
clouded gunmetal gild of the alder row.

## CANDLEWOOD VALE

In November she will trade in the body.  
Leaves will crust over the chassis.  
A cricket will scuttle beneath the stove  
as I stand at the frosted lip of the window  
in this apartment where I spoil.  
Scrolls litter the stairwells  
in elaborate wooden spirals.  
Already I am shaving angels from her lindens.

The yard is quartered by rods of mottled saplings  
and a spread of butter-colored grass.  
The garden has broken into a terrible rash.  
Out in an unused birdhouse  
the squirrels have already looted  
the yarn from its breast.  
Crows are swooping down from power lines  
to rest on an overturned basin.  
Someone is cracking a whip at a crippled  
wolfhound's hips.

I do not watch the banquet pass from her muzzle.  
It takes three men to prop her on a wire bed  
and strip her mange  
like a badland.  
I am terrified of what history will rub out.  
It was only yesterday  
two spores rehearsed  
in the hollow of my mouth.  
I slid from my spoils  
and drifted into the crabgrass  
on the edge of the cul de sac.  
No one will remember. Not even the almanac.

## THEY CALLED IT HOG ISLAND

There never before had been conceived  
a plan for the fabrication of ships  
in such cold, silent deeps,

though by 1917, our need overseas  
for troops, goods and guns required it.  
There never before had been conceived

a manmade island, the possibility  
of commanding steel or stone to rise from silt  
in such cold, silent deeps.

The Army Corps filled the seeps  
with black muck dredged in an enormous dig.  
There never before had been conceived,

not even by early settlers, their felled trees  
fused into dikes, such earthworks. Once, pigs  
in such cold, silent deeps

in wood-bound marshlands roamed free.  
Then the charcoal clip of machinery, cogs and rigs  
as never before had been conceived  
in such cold, silent deeps.

## THEY CALLED IT DEVIL'S TOWER

In boots discarded along the darkening timber,  
dandelion dun, calves as pitch as holes.  
Was it mercury, was it a birch forest?  
A Pyrex basin of scuttling silverfish plaque,  
land. Where the sea floor lifted its mast,  
they called it subsidence, called it reclaimed.  
Cured, bronzed, declawed and left to thaw  
to granite, driftwood sun, inculpable morning.  
The shape of the island was a hoe, a roadblock.  
A coast of a gown at the end of an awl,  
a reef stalled as steed in the lineage,  
plantless aside nigiri, orchis, flounder.  
Gravel inlay of gloaming, pink-sailed archery.  
Concentric pewter tines, parlor grass  
bull-frames along a rock bay quarry-  
louse. Whitewashed shag of infected vineyard.  
Slope of evicted ailanthus, axial kitten heel  
houndstooth to porcelain claw, clasped black  
in flight. It came from linen, amaranth felled,  
unfurled, its muss a thrust fist of plaster  
and in one crag of balmy cauter, a fern  
filigree of tradewind bucking its molt, basalt  
of quinine and tonic, unmoored, aching to lee.



## CHAMPION MILL

*Variations on a field, Missoula, MT*

there is a buoyancy to ice unencoded  
there is a buoyant blossom in spectacle  
no part comes naturally part is work  
and the days work and the aphids  
the telomeres and tentative wrist  
a glass quality in them now  
a glass quality in the snow  
a windshield embedded with spectacles  
bedazzled quotients of ice  
a windshield withstands elements  
blue windshield supplants a sky  
hazed red with rumor smoky  
clavicles of turbines  
cavities design

hooks in the shoulder of a byway  
old rumor unproved appendix  
a buoyancy in the shifting gear  
gearshift of manual transmission  
in tape loop lupine cellophane  
rumor backpedals down the highway  
but what of drift of hint in shag and  
what of green flies and what of redux  
platinum sparkplugs and what of harts  
of speculative fiction spooks coils kisses  
and what of domain walls and monopoles  
and what of the trowel used to contuse  
this water to describe dance  
as curve of pursuit

somewhere a landfill with its callus  
of cold beryllium  
measured wind with foil fan  
rebar skewed to violet  
somewhere a window painted pink  
closed its ear  
archaic torso of a mill  
decorated like a war veteran  
its red and yellow tags  
black tape lip  
mouth ajar lets  
weather in  
what would a geologist do  
with a heart like this

a surface of a sphere is an approximation  
a wily chaotic hoop of flagpole  
a chimney stovepipe gyroscope caduceus  
a shipboard compass computer  
simulation a rotating plate of dust  
and what of tibia of china and what lust  
and what of siamese we  
all a bit live a bit must  
the brass quality of the gimbal  
the brass quality of dusk  
and what of radar  
analogous to duel  
of turbulence  
of rust

blue is symptom of a deeper malady  
two kinds of blue      mesozoic pleiocene  
neither intuitive neither dream  
neither metacentric boundaries key  
the violet blacklit landscape painting  
its *nova totius terrarum orbis geographica*  
its glittery theater of snowglobe  
their fasciate obligate cartomancy  
their theater of key with velvet rope  
theater of scree of bruise of  
wild unknowing wild  
blackberry made bronze  
by scarcity made barb wire  
unable to uncrow

in deconstructing a minor key  
in a popular book on an ancient world  
from the hoover dam to cape canaveral  
where do these stairs actually go  
and why do black holes radiate energy  
and why does this energy imply heat  
and heat imply body and body  
imply loss and why does slow loss  
of heat suggest we evaporate slowly  
and who does the black hole really love  
and where does this aqueduct flow  
and where do we store the silent  
films no one screens anymore  
and the end music why is it silver

go to field a periphery  
go to a field with a friend  
pass caricature paintings  
past weed acrylic flint  
and lay on your back arms spread  
and lay in the black stink of park  
earth convex against your harp  
dirt flexed under mars  
go without javelin corn or lens  
and go without trial goal or fence  
without the batsman will insist  
without the batter will insist  
and will assist  
and will assist

what percent tungsten  
percent lead  
what lock shale of yellowcake  
thread beams too damp to burn  
pitch like a vent  
somewhere a lack of firewood  
strikes a blue match  
somewhere a satellite seals  
its mind cell by cell retires  
its blueshift  
sinks  
in a drift  
o what longing for drift  
if there were no drift